



The Florida Senate

Interim Project Report 2000-31

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Committee on Education

Senator Anna Cowin, Chairman

MIDDLE SCHOOL/HIGH SCHOOL READINESS

SUMMARY

Eighty-seven percent of Florida's students in grades 6, 7, and 8 attend a traditional middle school, consisting of those three grades in a school by themselves. Middle schools are organized to provide an environment for students who are in transition from childhood to adolescence. Within this environment, a few districts separate sixth grade students from others, under the premise that they are too young to mingle with seventh and eighth graders.

School districts implement various transition activities to help students accommodate to middle school and high school. Students visit the school they will attend. Guidance counselors visit students to help them plan their academic program. Principals of the new school speak to parent-teacher organizations to explain what students will encounter at the new school and to answer parents' questions. Two recommendations from superintendents are incorporated in this report: transition should be a part of each school's guidance program and each school's improvement plan.

There are no formal measures of readiness for middle school and high school; however, the high rate of retention in ninth grade--17 percent--would indicate that students are not ready for high school work. In recent years, the Department of Education (DOE) has focused on raising standards, expanding the assessment program, and improving teacher quality. For these reforms to be successful, school districts and the DOE should work together to determine the cause of the high retention rate at ninth grade and determine changes in the system that would enable students to progress successfully. As data becomes available from the expanded assessment system, the DOE should use the data to determine if there is an optimal grade configuration for schools to foster students' success.

BACKGROUND

Legislative attention has been focused for the last several years on programs and strategies to ensure that children are ready to begin school. Seldom mentioned, but of equal importance, is the readiness of children to make the transition from elementary school to middle school, and from middle school to high school. Middle school students experience the onset of puberty and are asked to accept an increasing level of individual responsibility for their academic work. A smooth articulation from one school level to the next is extremely important for their success.

The academic performance of students in grades 5 through 9 is a concern in the United States and, in particular, in the Southeastern states. The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) issued a report in March 1998 entitled "Education's Weak Link: Student Performance in the Middle Grades" that showed the proficiency levels of eighth graders in SREB states lagging behind those of eighth graders in other regions of the country. Nationally, 39 percent of eighth graders score below the basic level in math. In the states served by the SREB, almost 50 percent of eighth graders score below the basic level. In 1996, forty-six percent of Florida's eighth grade public school students scored below the basic level in mathematics, and in 1998, thirty-five percent scored below the basic level in reading.

As part of an initiative on middle grades education, SREB has issued three subsequent reports that have focused on "Raising the Bar..." (June 1998), "Improving Teaching..." (December 1998), and "...State Actions to Improve Student Achievement..." (June 1999). The DOE has been invited to participate in the SREB initiative by designating two middle schools in the state to develop demonstration models. However, in light of the extensive reforms required by HB 751, the DOE is considering whether participation in the initiative would be distracting to schools that are already focused on an ambitious school improvement agenda.

The purpose and nature of the curriculum changes as students progress through grades K-12. In elementary school, the focus is on foundations in reading, writing, mathematics, science and social studies. A love of learning and an understanding of how to find information is a part of building the foundations in elementary school. Middle school is a time of exploration. Students in the middle grades try a variety of subjects as a way of finding where their talents and interests lie. High school is a time for concentration in required subjects and electives as a way of preparing for work and higher education.

When schools are organized around the grade groupings K-5, 6-8, and 9-12, abrupt changes in the delivery of instruction occur at the same time the focus of the curriculum changes. As students move from development of the foundations of learning to exploration of many subjects, they also move to a bigger building where they must go from room to room and teacher to teacher. They keep their books, a multi-subject notebook, and other belongings in a locker in a hallway. And the older students in the school are starting to look and act like adults. Similar changes--to an even bigger building with more teachers and very adult-like peers-- happens at ninth grade when students begin to concentrate on academic subjects in depth. Helping students to make a smooth transition from elementary to middle, to high school can free them to concentrate on learning--the activity for which the big, new intimidating environment was created.

METHODOLOGY

This interim project is on the subject of transition to and from middle school. The report looks at the issue of transition apart from other factors that influence success, such as appropriate curriculum, good instruction, school safety, and parental involvement.

In preparation for this report, staff reviewed research and journal articles on the topic of middle school transition and met with Department of Education (DOE) officials responsible for curriculum. The DOE furnished data regarding school configuration, membership and retention in grade for students in grades 5 through 9.

Committee staff sent a survey to the 67 school district superintendents asking how grades are grouped in their schools, how they thought grades should be grouped, how the middle school day should be organized, and how personnel could help to ease the transition from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school. Of the 67 school district superintendents

who received the survey, 42 responded to the committee.

A project of this type usually includes information gathered from school district site visits. Interviews with students, parents, and personnel at the school and district level provide information that cannot be gathered by a written survey. However, because this project was conducted at a time when most schools were not in session, it was not possible to conduct interviews in school districts. The information provided in this report does not include the kind of information that can only be gleaned on site.

FINDINGS

School Organization

The practice of having a separate school for the middle grades between elementary school and high school began in the 1920s. Before that time, a student attended a grammar school in grades 1-8 and a high school in grades 9-12, or 9-11 in some states. Based in part on the premise that grades 7 and 8 were repetitious in elementary school, junior high schools served grades 7-9 from the 1920's through the 1960s. Junior high schools brought the subject specialization of high school into grades 7 and 8. By the 1960s, in response to theories about adolescent development, a new pattern emerged that organized grades 6, 7, and 8 into a middle school designed to foster a transition from childhood to adolescence. Flexible scheduling that permits students to achieve continuous progress is a common feature of middle schools.

A traditional middle school consists of grades 6, 7, and 8. Eighty-seven percent of Florida's students in grades 6, 7, and 8 attend a traditional middle school. The remaining thirteen percent of the middle grade students are enrolled in 30 other school configurations. The most common other grade groupings are K-6, PK-6, PK-12, K-12, K-8, 6-12, and 7-12. Under s. 230.23 (4)(a), F.S., school boards are required to establish schools and adopt enrollment plans. Most of the responding districts were satisfied with the grade configuration they had chosen for their schools. Whether sixth grade was in elementary school or middle school, respondents said the decision was based on research and child development theory. A few respondents said they would choose a different configuration for their schools if fiscal resources and community support would make such a change possible.

Special Accommodations for Sixth Grade

The survey asked if districts separate sixth graders from the other middle school grades or separate ninth graders from the other high school grades. Eight of the responding districts separate sixth grade students from students in the other middle grades. Thirty-four of the responding districts do not separate sixth grade from the other middle school grades. However, nine of the districts that do not separate sixth grade from seventh and eighth would recommend doing so if facilities, parental support, and the other necessary resources were available.

A few districts group middle school students into “houses” which are groups of students and teachers who stay together for the year, providing a sense of community within the larger school. In some districts, a house contains students in one grade only; in others, a house contains a multi-grade group of students. Thus, a house could isolate sixth graders or ensure that they mingle with students in other grades.

Other special accommodations for sixth grade, include the following:

- C Block scheduling to give extended time for language arts and mathematics
- C “Looping” to keep teachers with students over several grade levels.
- C Creating two-teacher teams for sixth grade students; limiting the number of times they change classes; increasing to four-teacher teams for seventh and eighth grades.

Special Accommodations for Ninth Grade

Special ninth grade centers sometimes provide a smaller group in which students can accommodate to high school. Thirty-five of the 42 responding districts do not separate ninth grade from the other high school grades. Seven of the 35 districts said they would separate ninth grade from the higher grades if facilities and other factors supported the change. Seven of the responding districts separate at least some of their ninth grade students from the other high school grades.

Transition Activities

Districts use a variety of activities and strategies to foster a smooth transition from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school. Types of transition activities include the following:

- C In the Spring, fifth graders visit the middle school they will attend and eighth graders visit the high school they will attend.
- C Middle school guidance counselors visit the elementary school and high school guidance counselors visit the middle school to help students prepare for their new academic schedule.
- C High school students who are active in sports, drama, science, etc., visit the middle school to talk with students about high school life.
- C Middle school principals speak to the parent-teacher organizations at elementary schools regarding expectations in middle school.
- C High school students meet small groups of incoming freshmen and accompany them throughout a day of orientation.
- C Fifth graders change classes as practice for middle school class changes.
- C Ninth grade students and their parents attend a registration and orientation meeting with high school teachers and guidance counselors where a 4-year plan is drafted for the each student.

Superintendents recommended that transition activities be a part of school improvement plans. They also recommended that transition be a part of each school’s guidance program.

Age of Students

Students who progressed through the grades without retention would be approximately 12 years old by February of the sixth grade year, 13 years old in the seventh grade, and 14 years old in the eighth grade. More than two-thirds of students in the middle grades are the appropriate age for the grade. In February 1999, at least 97 percent of students in each grade fell within a 3-year age range: for sixth grade students, from 11 to 13 years old; seventh grade from 12 to 14; and eighth grade from 13 to 15 years old. While most students fell within these age ranges, the age span for students enrolled in grades 6-8, ranged from 8 to 19 years old. Being over age for grade is highly correlated with dropping out of school. Thus the 14 percent of sixth graders, 17 percent of seventh graders, and 18 percent of eighth graders who are over age for their grade are more likely to drop out of school.

Retention in the Ninth Grade

The percentage of students retained in the ninth grade would indicate that many students are not ready for high school. Seventeen percent of ninth grade students were retained in 1997-98. Nineteen percent of male students and almost fifteen percent of female students were retained. Thirteen percent of white students, 23 percent of black students, and 21 percent of Hispanic students were retained in ninth grade. The recent increase in standards likely will make this retention rate worse.

These ninth grade retention rates could be the result of cumulative problems throughout elementary and middle school, and they could be the result of a high school experience that is overwhelming to the students. Whatever the sources of the problem, the high retention rate is a sign that the education system is not functioning. Florida has established high standards for students in all grades, requires an individual plan to be developed and followed for each student who does not meet minimum standards, and provides other educational options for the entire student body at schools that are failing. For this ambitious reform to work to the benefit of students, this underlying problem in the system must be analyzed and addressed, either by individual school systems or by the state as a whole. The Department of Education should join with school districts to investigate the causes for the high rate of retention in ninth grade and determine changes in the system that would enable students to progress successfully.

At present, Florida does not have statewide achievement data for students in sixth or ninth grades. Therefore, it would be very difficult to compare achievement of students in districts that have traditional middle schools and those that do not. However, it would be possible to look at the histories of students who are over age for their grade to determine where they were retained and for what reason.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Department of Education should join with school districts to investigate the causes for the high rate of retention in ninth grade and determine changes in the system that would enable students to progress successfully.
2. As data becomes available from the expanded statewide assessment system, the DOE should use the data to determine if there is an optimal grade configuration for schools to foster students' success.
3. Transition activities should be included in school improvement plans.
4. Transition should be an important part of each school's guidance program.

COMMITTEE(S) INVOLVED IN REPORT (*Contact first committee for more information.*)

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MEMBER OVERSIGHT

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